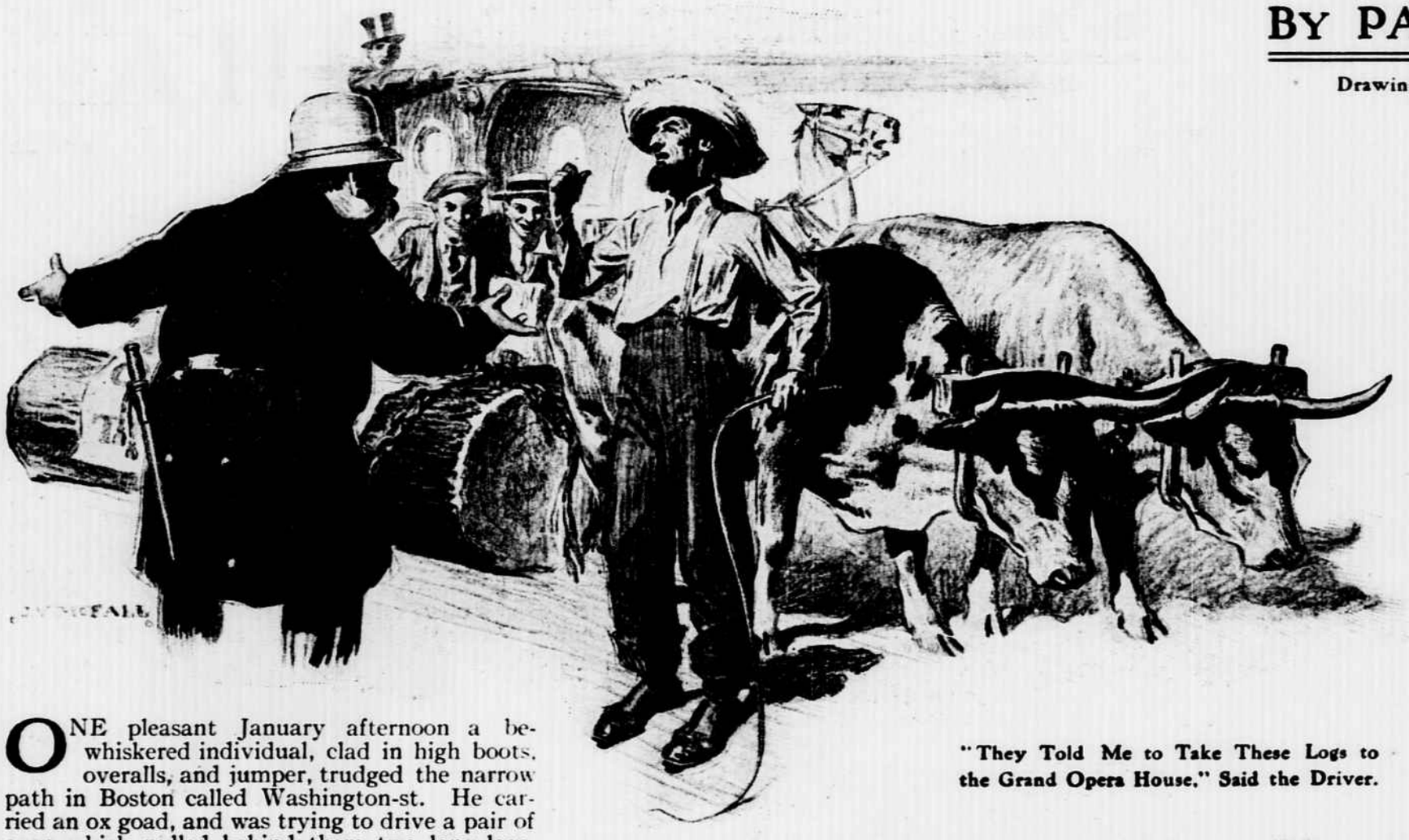
AHEAD OF THE SHOW

By PAUL WEST

Drawing by J. V. McFall



"They Told Me to Take These Logs to the Grand Opera House," Said the Driver.

ONE pleasant January afternoon a bewhiskered individual, clad in high boots, overalls, and jumper, trudged the narrow path in Boston called Washington-st. He carried an ox goad, and was trying to drive a pair of oxen which pulled behind them two long logs, chained together. On the logs was pasted a large card, plainly addressed, "Mr. Richard Golden, Old Jed Prouty, Grand Opera House, Boston, Mass., C. O. D."

The driver of the oxen was having his own troubles. It is no sinecure to pilot a pair of animals of contrary disposition, such as these had, anywhere; but when they are dragging two fifty-foot logs through a crowded city street in the busiest part of the day, the situation smacks of desperation. Street cars were lined up at the rear of the logs, wagons were crowded into the curb, and policemen were holding back the curious mobs that collected in greater number with every painful foot traversed by the ox driver and his team.

"Here you!" demanded one policeman. "What's the meaning of all this?"

"Durned if I know!" said the ox driver, "A man hired me to drive this here team from Lynn [this mornin' to the grand Opera House an' collect four dollars an' fifty cents for them two logs, an' I'm doin' it."

"But don't you see how you're obstructin' the traffic?"

"I'm doin' the best I can," said the driver. "Gee! Whoa!" this to the oxen, with a crack of the goad.

The policemen conferred. The obstructing oxen and the logs were now at Boylston-st. A few blocks farther and the congested part of the town would be passed. Wouldn't it better to let the man finish his job?

Thus they decided, and, driving the crowds away as best they might, they made the ox driver hurry as much as he could; so that eventually he reached the Grand Opera House, just above Dover-st., attended by a few thousand Bostonians.

The oxen and the logs were driven to the curb, and the driver went inside the theater lobby.

"I've brung those logs for Mr. Richard Golden," he said, "an' they's four dollars an' fifty cents collect on 'em."

"What logs?" demanded the ticket seller, who sent a man out to see what all the trouble was. Then ensued an argument, in which everyone around the house declared he knew nothing about any logs. The driver wanted to know what he should do with them.

"Take 'em back where you got 'em," said somebody.

"All right," said the driver resignedly. He cracked his goad, and the oxen started on their ten-mile journey back to Lynn.

This time, however, they got no farther than a block or so before the driver attempted to turn into a side street, with the result that the logs were jammed across the street, with apparently no way of extricating them. The police arrested the driver and took him to the station, followed by the admiring multitude, leaving the logs in the street to be examined by everyone who passed.

Next day the unfortunate ox driver was fined ten dollars in police court, and Richard Golden, who "happened" to come into the courtroom, paid his fine. The newspapers had columns about the incident, in which, of course, the names of the actor and his play figured conspicuously.

The reader scarcely needs to be told that the whole affair was cleverly contrived by the advance agent of "Old Jed Prouty" to boom the attraction. He had the satisfaction of his star's receiving hundreds of dollars' worth of advertising at almost no cost and little trouble.

A Thing of the Past

SUCH things do not happen frequently nowadays. The papers do not often contain accounts of actresses losing their diamonds or stopping runaway horses, as they used to; for the simple reason that in respect to the work of the advance agent, as well as in other ways, the theatrical business has changed. To-day the man who goes out ahead of the show has his work pretty well cut out for him. His attraction is not booked in opposition to another of the same caliber or character, and, furthermore, the public is no longer attracted by "circus methods," as they used to be called. A crowded house could not be drawn to Julia Marlowe to-day by dressing a dozen girls up as Viola in "Twelfth Night," and marching them through the streets, placarded. Yet I remember of this scheme being used, once at least, in Chicago, to advertise Madame Modjeska. The public is wiser and takes its theatricals more seriously.

In the old days the man who went ahead of the show began at once to cudgel his brains for the most astonishing plan to attract attention and arouse interest. And some astonishing events were the result. I can remember some which even now may be recalled by the reader who can hark back a decade or two. Many perpetrators of these wild schemes are prominent theatrical managers who would scorn to rely on such methods for booming their stars or companies and would not countenance similar practices by the young men they employ as advance agents.

Man Overboard

I REMEMBER a morning in Detroit, in the fall of 1894. People along the shore of the river had seen a terrible sight. A boat containing two men had been observed in the river. The men were evidently fishing. Suddenly they began to quarrel, and, to the horror of the spectators, one of them leaned over and struck his companion with an oar. The unlucky man, apparently knocked unconscious, fell into the river, and his companion rowed to a wharf and disappeared before anybody could catch him.

The police were summoned, and preparations were made to drag the river, which was very shallow at the point where the crime had been committed. Crowds thronged the nearest bridge and the banks of the river while the police went about their horrid task. At last the body was brought to the surface. It was a dummy, and on the back of the white canvas jumper it wore were the words, "Eddie Foy in 'Off the Earth,' Whitney Opera House."

The next week Chicago was treated to a second specimen of the advance agent's work for Eddie Foy; the same advance agent, of course, who had concocted the terrible river murder. It was not so lugubrious as the first, but just as efficacious.

The man ahead of the show had several thousand dodgers printed for distribution in Chicago, announcing the arrival of his star, who at that time was a great Chicago favorite. He arrived in Chicago, to find the dodgers ready for him, but also ready a new ordinance passed by the city fathers prohibiting the distribution of dodgers about the streets. Here was an obstacle, and the agent thought seriously. Finally he hit on a plan for distributing his dodgers and at the same time saving some money.

Hiring a couple of men, he arranged with the superintendent of the Masonic Temple to allow him to take the two big boxes containing the dodgers to the roof of the building. It was a cold and blustery day, and the wind was blowing a typical Chicago lake gale directly over the town. The agent and his assistants took the dodgers out of their wrappers and laid them in bundles along the edge of the roof of the building. Then they went down stairs.

Before they had reached the ground floor it had begun to snow dodgers. The air was full of them, and they were being carried everywhere they would do the most good. The agent watched his scheme working, and then went out of town for a few days.

A Bomb for Camille D'Arville

I HAD the disagreeable pleasure of devising a scheme for booming the presence of Miss Camille D'Arville in Pittsburgh once. I struck upon the idea of having a dynamite bomb sent to her in a bouquet. It is always advisable in such cases to have the evidence ready; so I went about getting some sort of bomb made. A policeman whom I let into the scheme told me where I could get such things—a nice old man who sold dynamite and other paraphernalia of oil wells. The nice old man entered into the project pleasantly and turned the bomb over to me next day.

It was a pretty thing, a piece of lead pipe some eight inches long, packed with dynamite, and, though I did not know it at the time, practical, as they say in the theatrical world; that is, it would work. I told my policeman friend I had the bomb, and showed it to him. I was going to put it in a bouquet, send it to Miss D'Arville at the Alvin Theater, and have her discover it. She was not to be in the scheme, as I did not rely upon her ability to carry it through. Of course she would notify her maid, who would call the police, and my friend was to be the policeman on hand at the theater.

Well, when I showed him my bomb he nearly fainted.

"Good Lord!" said he. "Take that away! It's deadly! Look—the old fellow has even put the fulminating cap at the end! It might go off, and if it did it would blow the theater to pieces!"

Gingerly enough I put it into a little valise I had, intending to throw it away as soon as I got out of Pittsburgh, as I was leaving that night for Montreal; but I forgot about it, and the fact that I had a deadly bomb with me never entered my mind again until next day as the train was about reaching the American border. The customs men began coming through the train examining luggage, and I suddenly remembered that in my valise was the bomb. Suppose they should find it! It would be pleasant for me to be caught taking a deadly thing like that into Canada! I must get rid of it!

Hurriedly opening my valise, I took the awful thing out and put it into my pocket. Then I started for the smoker, and as I reached the platform I threw the bomb far out into the river, as we were just crossing the trestle. I watched for it to go off; but it never did.

A few weeks later, however, I succeeded in working an elaborate infernal machine plot on the same star, Miss D'Arville. It was in New York, and I confided my purpose to the regular press agent of the theater at which we were playing. We made together a pretty little affair consisting of a cigar box containing a little loose powder and a row of matches which would be set off by opening the box. We sent it by mail to Miss D'Arville, and sat down to await developments. They came. There was a flash in her dressing room that evening and calls for the police. The reporters learned of it, and the papers next day were full of the story. Miss D'Arville herself even engaged a private detective to detect the perpetrators of the foul deed.

Other Work Nowadays

BUT the man ahead of the show in those days had other work than merely inventing exciting circumstances for the papers to print. On arriving in a town it was his duty to arrange for the transportation of scenery and baggage, to fix on a scale of prices with the local manager, and to look out personally for the billing of the attraction. This latter duty meant that on the Saturday night before the arrival of his company he would in all probability have to go round the town with the bill posters of the theater and see that his printing was properly placed.

In such cities as Pittsburgh, a dozen years ago and more, Saturday night's excursion meant numberless conflicts between the bill posting brigades of the various houses. I can recall one time when the bill posters of the Alvin and the Grand Opera House combined to fight the crowd from the Bijou and the Duquesne. The two forces, fifty strong, each with an advance agent, met during the night, and all were arrested after a serious battle, in which many were injured with paste buckets and brush poles.

These little side issues, however, are of little interest to the general public, which is more concerned with the stories the papers print about the theatrical attractions under the influence of the advance man. As the instances quoted will indicate, the publicity man of the company recks little of his methods or the amount of work resulting on him, so long as he achieves his purpose and makes talk for his attraction. For him to use the company to boom something else is, however, a most unusual occurrence, and yet I recall one instance

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